

CHAPTER

1

Tampa Bay

There was never any doubt that Louie Piniella would be a ballplayer.

“I knew it when he was three years old,” said his mother Margaret. “My brother Joe had a broom and he cut the stick down and bought a tennis ball, and you could see, even at that age, how hard Louie hit that ball.”

It wasn't long before little Lou was out in front of the house for hours at a time, bouncing the ball off the steps and fielding “fly balls,” which he created by throwing the ball onto the roof and catching it as it rolled off.

By six, he was at the park with the other boys. “If there was any team playing, he would be there,” said Margaret. “I never had any problem with my kids. I knew exactly where they were. They were always at the park.”

Until Lou was seven, he lived with his parents and Margaret's brothers Joe, Mac, and Uncle Mac's wife, Gloria, in West Tampa in the three-bedroom home of Margaret's parents, Marcelinno and Beñina Magadan, who emigrated from Spain.

In 1950, about a year after the arrival of baby Joe, Lou's younger brother by six years, the family moved from the house on Conrad St. to Cordelia St., where the diamond across the street now resides in Piniella Park.

“We spoke Spanish in the house because I thought it would be good for the kids to learn Spanish,” recalled Margaret. “I wish I would’ve learned Italian from the Italians in the neighborhood.”

The neighborhood was as bustling as the house—Spaniards and Italians all comingling in one loud, rollicking, great-smelling couple of blocks where everyone was seemingly related. “This neighborhood was paradise,” said Margaret. “There were no problems with the neighbors, everyone helped out. I miss all of that.”

Margaret, a tall, strong woman, was an All-State center in basketball from 1936–39 and a standout in softball. In grammar school, she played first base for the boys’ team. “I was the only girl playing,” she laughed. “They begged me to play.”

Louis Piniella was a pitcher, and he played in the highly competitive Intersocial League in West Tampa with Lou’s uncles Joe and Mac. It could be compared to semi-pro level, though those who saw the senior Piniella pitch say it was probably closer to Double A level.

“It was very good baseball,” recalled Lou’s childhood buddy Tony Gonzalez. “I remember his dad was a great pitcher. Both parents were very good athletes. And his Uncle Mike Magadan [Uncle Joe is the father of former big-leaguer Dave Magadan] was also a great player, so Lou has the DNA.”

By the age of two, little Lou was a regular, sitting next to his mother and watching the Tuesday or Thursday night games and Sunday doubleheaders in Ybor City and West Tampa. When he got a little older, he would serve as batboy, studying the older men, who would drum the fundamentals of the game into the boy’s head.

The games were more than simple recreation but a way of life for the working folks of West Tampa, inciting a passion that would carry off the ballfield and into their kitchens afterward, where the smell of thick vegetable soup and yellow rice and chicken would intermingle with talk of baseball.

“You’d listen to Lou’s dad and uncles talk baseball,” said another boyhood pal, Mondy Flores, “and they knew every nuance of the

game. They were baseball fanatics, and Lou's mom was too, and it never stopped, what they did right, what they did wrong. Lou would come home to Tampa in the winter when he was managing in Seattle and have a cup of coffee with his mother, and she'd say, 'Lou, how come in this situation, you left that pitcher in?' And 'I don't understand why this guy doesn't bunt.'

"Lou would say, 'Mom, this guy makes \$8 million. He doesn't want to bunt.'"

But he didn't argue. You respected your elders in Lou Piniella's neighborhood, where everyone was a surrogate parent.

"None of us had a lot of money," said Gonzalez, "but we were rich in the love of our families, rich with friends from the neighborhood. Grandparents lived with the children. We ate a lot of rice and a lot of potatoes. It was a treat to get a piece of meat. But they were hard-working people."

Most worked in the cigar factories, Margaret as a secretary for Morgan Cigar Company, and Louis as a salesman of cigars, cigarettes, candy, and household drugs from store to store until buying his own distributorship. Margaret then went to work for her husband, handling the bookkeeping while Lou's grandparents stayed home and took care of the kids.

At night and on weekends, there was baseball.

"They were tough times and that's all there was," said Gonzalez. "The first time Lou and I ever saw a TV, we were probably about seven. We had an old DuMont, Lou had one, too. From time to time, we'd wrap tinfoil around the antenna and watch the Game of the Week."

They would learn to speak English from the Catholic nuns, descendants of the Salesian Sisters, who had traveled down from their headquarters in Haledon, New Jersey.

"There was no messing with them," remembered Flores with a shudder. "When they were ready to have discipline, when they had had enough, it was enough, and there was not a person who would try to cross them. They wouldn't stand for it."

By then, it was already obvious to Lou's friends who were the most gifted boys among them but more than that, who was the leader.

"He had a magnetism," said Joe Ficcorotta, a neighborhood kid a few years younger than Lou and his friends who watched Piniella in awe. "He was a down-to-earth guy, but certain people just have that magnetism where they can get people to do things and energize people around him and that was Lou."

Baseball players sprouted quicker than the grass in the sun-bleached outfield, boys like Tony La Russa and Ken Suarez and Al Lopez Jr., on neighboring playground teams. But everyone played and in the summer, Lou and his pals would start their day on their neighborhood diamond at 8:00 in the morning—home plate not 50 yards from the Piniellas' house—and get kicked out at 10:00 when the park closed.

"Someone's mom would yell 'It's dinnertime,' we'd all scatter, and within 15, 20 minutes, we'd be right back out there," said Gonzalez. "It was a wonderful childhood."

Piniella excelled at basketball and football too, but touch football was as close as Margaret Piniella's boy would ever come to any sort of serious involvement with a game in which some thought he could have made a great quarterback.

"Yes, he could've been good," Margaret Piniella said in a non-sense tone. "He was good in everything. But I wouldn't let him. Neither of my kids played football. Too rough. My brother Joe, the oldest, almost lost a kidney playing football at Loyola [University in New Orleans]. It almost killed him. So I told Lou, 'No football.' They could play touch but no tackle."

Little did she know then that it was a seemingly harmless hike during a trip to the Pony League national baseball championship that would nearly kill her son.

Lou Piniella was 13 in the summer of 1956 as his West Tampa team, with La Russa as a teammate, traveled to Ontario, California. It was Lou's first plane ride, his first trip outside of Tampa, in fact,

and all the boys were awed by the experience and particularly by a side trip to Mount Baldy before the title game.

“My folks made the trip and my dad rented a car because we were going to take some of the guys to a mountain range nearby,” said one of Lou’s closest friends, Paul Ferlita. “We were Florida boys from the flatland, so some of the guys rolled a log down one side of the mountain, not knowing it could do any damage.

“Well, my father held them back to scold them and by the time he came back, to this day I’m not sure if Lou was walking fast or running down the side of the hill, but the next thing we knew, he started tumbling down, on all rock, toward a drop that went 1,000 feet down.”

All Lou remembered was stumbling over a loose rock and going over the cliff. La Russa remembered him catching up to the group from behind and then disappearing over the edge.

“I thought I saw him land on his back,” the Cardinals’ skipper recalled. “I thought he was crushed.”

“The only thing between him and the bottom,” said Ferlita, “was a big boulder about five to six feet around, and that stopped him. If that hadn’t stopped him, he would have been hurt a lot worse and possibly killed.

“We rushed him to the hospital. My dad was driving a rented vehicle so he wasn’t used to it and I remember he kept putting the brakes on and I was thinking we would get in a car wreck before we got to the hospital.”

Doctors kept Piniella overnight with a minor concussion, cuts and bruises, and a sore ankle. It was broken, but X-rays, or the X-ray technician, didn’t pick up the fracture.

“Lou played the next day but he couldn’t pitch so he played outfield and he felt really badly because he was our best pitcher,” said Ferlita. “But he was so grateful he was still alive, he said, ‘I’m going to church every Sunday.’

“Then, after we got beat two days later, Lou was so angry he threw the baseball as high as he could, and it landed right in the middle of the winning team’s prayer meeting.”

The ankle injury would affect Piniella for years to come, in his mind effectively ending his basketball career in college. But it was his first true love, and some argue, his greatest talent.

When the boys played CYA basketball in grade school, they christened Piniella with the nickname “Louie, the Hook” because he wasn’t much of a passer. “He got razzed about it all the time,” said Ferlita.

In junior high, Piniella developed a reputation as one of the best up-and-coming basketball players in Tampa and fulfilled those expectations in high school, raining hook shots and one-handed jumpers over the competition as rival high schools packed the gym to boo the star from Jesuit High.

“He was at least equal in basketball to baseball,” said Gonzalez. “He could shoot; his jumping ability was incredible; he had high, high energy.”

“He was one of the best athletes to come out of Tampa,” said Piniella’s basketball coach at Jesuit, Paul Straub. “I really wanted to make a quarterback out of him, but his mother wouldn’t let him play.”

For close to 40 years, Piniella’s single-game Tampa scoring record of 54 points stood. “And in his day, buckets that went for two points now go for three,” Straub pointed out. A 50-percent shooter, Piniella scored 1,716 points in three years, another record.

“And one of the outstanding games he played, the other team put two men on him, and he scored one field goal,” said Straub. “But the rest of the kids scored 55, and we won.”

Among the schools that came calling for him in basketball was Louisville, but recruiters were concerned about his temper.

“I wasn’t a bad kid,” he said, “maybe just a little mischievous.”

In high school, Lou and his friends would skip class to go watch the Reds in spring training at Al Lopez Field, less than a mile from their school. “We’d hang around the outfield trying to steal baseballs,” Ferlita recalled. “Then we’d write notes [excusing their absences], and Lou would sign mine and I’d sign his.”

It never worked.

The prefect of discipline obviously had an imagination and a sense of humor. “If you got caught smoking, you’d have to roll his cigarettes,” recalled Piniella. If you acted the fool, “you’d have to draw pictures of donkeys, cut them out, and write ‘I am a jackass,’ on them.”

And if you cut class to goof off at spring training, you’d have to draw two palm trees with a man sleeping on a hammock in between or write the school rules backwards 100 times.

“Either that,” said Ferlita, “or he’d hit you on the head with his key ring.”

Asked how often they got in trouble, Ferlita did not hesitate. “Quite often,” he said. “Once, we compared our [excuse] notes, and we didn’t even know where we were.”

When they got home, there would probably be some yelling. “But our parents weren’t too hard on us,” said Ferlita. “We made decent grades, and we were pretty good kids.”

Well, except for the time Lou hit the accelerator instead of the brake when his father was teaching him to drive and put a big hole in the chain-link fence that surrounded the ballfield across the street. But then, that was an accident.

* * *

One of the boys’ strongest influences was Coach Straub, who lost both legs and was left with a permanently disabled right hand from injuries sustained during training maneuvers at Guadalcanal as a Marine corporal in WWII, and who showed them what winning was really about.

Straub once scared a kid who thought he was tough and was unaware of the coach’s injuries by throwing a dart into his wooden leg.

At age 85 in the fall of 2006, shortly after Piniella was named manager of the Cubs, the old coach sat at his kitchen table with the yellowed newspaper clippings and black-and-white photos fanned out before him, his memory as sharp as his outlook was sunny.

Louie, he explained, invited him and some of his other former coaches to his retirement ceremony, brought them onto the field and had them introduced to the Yankee Stadium crowd. “Only time I’ve ever seen my dad cry,” said Steve Straub, Paul’s son.

They all genuflect at Coach Straub’s name. “He’s a marvelous man,” said Piniella. “What an influence he had in my formative years. I’ve always quietly thanked him for all the time he put in with me and the values he set.

“In sports, the will to win, to compete, it all starts earlier in life. And he was tough on me, which was good because I had a hot temper. He started to try to change that process.”

Straub said it wasn’t easy, on him or on a young Lou Piniella.

“Every time he took a shot, they fouled him,” said Straub, shaking his head. “They’d often try to start a fight with him, and officials would call fouls on him. They wanted him to get a technical. Lou would get very upset, and he’d come over and talk to me and I’d say, ‘You’ve got to calm down. You can’t let them do that to you. You’re playing for a team, and they’re the ones who are most important, not those people.’”

* * *

It wasn’t necessarily his temper that cost him his senior season on the baseball team, though the big-league scouts heard that it was.

Either way, it resulted in part from Lou butting heads with Jesuit baseball coach Jack O’Connell in the spring of 1961. As Piniella remembered it, after losing in the regional finals in basketball, he reported to O’Connell for baseball season, at which point the coach told him he wanted him to be his starting pitcher in their first game against Jefferson three days later.

Piniella said he couldn’t, that his arm wouldn’t be ready, and O’Connell told him that if he didn’t pitch, he was off the team.

Margaret Piniella recalled a slightly different version of the story.

“He would pitch, then next time someone else would pitch and then in the first or second inning, they’d put Lou in again,” she said. “I said, ‘Louie, you have a very promising career.’ I told him, ‘If you hurt that arm, then what happens? If you ruin that arm, you ruin your career. You’re not going to be able to do anything. You tell that coach you’ll be ready to pitch when the time comes, but don’t think you’re going to pitch every game.’

“Well, the coach didn’t like that, so Louie didn’t play that year. The coach said, ‘If you don’t want to pitch like that, don’t play,’ so Louie said, ‘I don’t play.’”

Piniella’s friend Kenny Suarez urged him to swallow his pride and ask to be back on the team but Lou wouldn’t do it.

“Lou Piniella was too stubborn, too proud, and probably too dumb to apologize,” Piniella wrote in his 1986 autobiography. “I sat there all spring watching my friends and eating my heart out.”

Piniella figured his stubbornness cost him about \$75,000, which is what the scouts had told him he could sign for out of high school. The next year, Tony La Russa signed for \$100,000 out of the neighboring Jefferson High School.

Instead, Piniella was headed to the University of Tampa on a basketball scholarship where he would also play baseball.

The basketball part, unfortunately, didn’t last very long.

Piniella recalled a game his freshman year at Louisville, a school that had once recruited him. It was a big game for Tampa, a chance to put the smaller school on the basketball map, and Piniella, playing guard, was called into the game before the half.

He was fouled three times, attempted four free throws and missed them all. In the locker room at halftime, Tampa coach Bob Lavoy called him out. “All-American high school basketball player, my ass,” the coach bellowed.

Piniella couldn’t help himself.

“You can’t be so smart either,” he yelled back. “You recruited me.”

If his basketball career wasn't over by then, it would be soon enough. That same year, he jumped from the roof of a college bar in order to escape from the police, who were presumably looking for underage drinkers, and landed on the ankle he injured falling on Mount Baldy.

It had bothered him all through high school, but mostly in basketball when he would come down hard after shooting, and when he landed on the ground in the alley behind the bar, the pain was excruciating.

His father let him sit in jail that night, and when he hobbled out the next morning, it was clear the ankle would not allow him to play basketball for the rest of the season.

His baseball coach and the athletic director at the University of Tampa, Sam Bailey, said his star slugger wasn't meant for basketball anyway.

"I remember the injury, but he didn't have it when he was playing baseball," Bailey said. "He just didn't fit in basketball like baseball. He was a heck of a lot better basketball player than he showed at the University of Tampa, but the coach couldn't handle him. He didn't play as well for the basketball coach as he played for me. Lou was a special case."

The temper was already an issue, but Bailey clearly had a soft spot for the young man with the sweet swing. The coach also had a sense of humor and still laughs about the time Lou's grandfather came to a game in Miami and asked his grandson if he had had lunch.

When Lou said he hadn't, his grandfather slipped him a Cuban sandwich through the outfield fence, and Lou shoved it into his glove until a line drive suddenly came toward him, lettuce flying one way, tomatoes the other as he made the catch.

"That's a favorite story," said the 85-year-old Bailey.

Piniella was never known as a lover of exercise, so while the team did attend to fitness, Bailey slipped a little extra running in for Lou.

“All he wanted to do was hit, so sometimes I’d run him out to the outfield, then I’d wave him in and he’d think he was going to bat, so he’d run in,” said Bailey. “Then I’d say, ‘Lou, you’re playing in too close’ or something else and send him back out to the outfield.”

During a solid freshman season, the scouts returned to see the kid they had shunned the year before. “Even though we were a small school, we played Florida, Florida State, Miami, so we got good exposure,” said Bailey, “and after about three, four games, the scouts were in our dugout all the time to see Lou. He was such a great natural hitter.

“He had the talent, a great eye, a natural swing. He never carried the bat awkwardly or swung awkwardly. The only thing I told him was to lay off the first pitch and watch it into the catcher’s mitt and then to look for what you want. I thought he’d be an outstanding player in the majors if he controlled his temper and got the right manager.”

Piniella was ready, and that summer he came home one day to find a scout representing the Cleveland Indians waiting for him on Cordelia Street. The Indians, the scout told him, were prepared to offer him a signing bonus of \$10,500—a \$7,500 progressive bonus and \$7,500 against his education if he signed with the Indians—\$25,000 in all.

Piniella never blinked. He signed on the spot and became a professional baseball player. He was on his way.